

BUILDING CONNECTIONS WITH **parents & communities**

Misperceptions about students' families could be contributing to a lack of parent participation at your schools.

One of the most difficult challenges we face as school leaders is building meaningful reciprocal connections with students, their families and the surrounding community. Each of us faces a different challenge based on the make-up of our own school community. Some leaders are inundated with “helicopter parents,” while others of us wish we could have a helicopter to go find some parents. Regardless of the context of your community, there are important questions that you must ask yourself in order to build family and community involvement.

By first critically examining our own personal beliefs we can begin to move forward in the work that we do as leaders. When we find ourselves blaming the parents for not attending meetings, it is going to make it difficult to lead school-wide change if we think the parents are at fault to begin with. We as leaders have to believe in what family and community involvement can be, so we must ensure that we are checking our own bias at the door.

Before prescribing a method to “fix” the lack of parent participa-

tion at your school, we need to ask ourselves a couple of questions. How do you characterize reluctant parents who refuse to attend your school meetings? Why are parents not coming to your school meetings? The answers to these questions will allow you to see if your perceptions of your parents match the reality. Your perceptions may actually be preventing you from having success in this area because you may not have reluctant parents at all.

School principals can potentially increase parent participation in order to improve student achievement by exploring and addressing cultural needs and sharing responsibility.

Address cultural needs

Start by asking yourself the following question: Do I know my clients? Are your parents generally young (elementary schools) or older? Are they working class or professionals? What ethnicities

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comprise your school community? Can the parents relate to you or can you relate to them? Do they find your meetings boring or unproductive? This information can help you tailor and market your meetings to your specific parent population.

The needs of elementary, middle and high school parents are different. Find out what their needs are and address them specifically in your meetings. What you think is important may not be to them. Your meetings may be geared strictly to student achievement, but their biggest concerns may be underage drinking, gangs or bullies. Listen to them and address their concerns before you share your needs.

Create understanding

If your community is largely unaware of the educational system, it is essential to increase parent understanding of how your school functions. Do not make assumptions about which parents should receive or will use certain types of school information. The focus should be on figuring out how to best distribute information so that all families have access.

Know your community's ethnicity and ask parents who are members of these groups to help you with cultural representations (symbols, foods, greetings, etc.). Provide interpreters at your meetings who are respected by those listening. Read about the various cultures in your school, and get out in the community and talk with people to garner knowledge about their history, customs and life stories.

The biggest deterrent for parents coming to your school meetings may be you. Perhaps your meetings take too long, or the information you present is not clear. Do you intimidate the parents? Are you approachable? Think of school meetings as you would a meal at a restaurant. Would you return to a restaurant where the food was good but the service was bad? If you are the problem, find support.

Another cultural need to consider is the time availability of parents. Schedule morning and evening meetings with the same message. You may even consider weekend meetings to meet family needs. If your meetings are late in the evening when parents are getting off work, do you have food for them and their children? Provide childcare as well.

Shared responsibility

Allow your teachers to be actively involved in your parent meetings, so parents can see the collective support coming from the school. Create opportunities for parents to volunteer and make it clear that the school's success depends on their participation as well. Highlight and acknowledge parents already working alongside the school such as your PTA, English Learner Advisory Committee

and School Site Council presidents. This will allow parents to see that their voice and participation is important.

Once your parents see the collective efforts of the group, recognize and celebrate success. Give credit to those who took leadership and tie it back to the shared responsibility of the group. Let them know that the success was due to their efforts. This will build trust and it will show parents that their presence at school meetings is not a waste of time.

Building family and community partnerships is never easy, but as leaders we must continue to challenge ourselves to create meaningful relationships with our school communities.



Resources for support

There are many great resources available to support school-wide efforts in developing family and community involvement. Below are helpful links to research and resources:

- California State Action Plan for School, Family, and Community Partnerships: www.cacompcenter.org/cs/cacc/view/nclb/11

- SEDL is a private, non-profit research corporation that has created a website that is full of helpful resources to school leaders. Here are two great links to family and community resources and research: www.sedl.org/pubs/free_family_community.html; www.sedl.org/connections/research-syntheses.html

- Harvard Family Research Project: www.hfrp.org/

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